

Japan's Geography

Main Idea Japan's mountains and islands isolated Japan and shaped its society.

Reading Focus Have you ever been in a place with no television, radio, or telephone? How would you feel if you did not know what was going on outside your home? Read to learn how Japan's geography isolated the Japanese and shaped their society.

Japan (juh•PAN) is a chain of islands that stretches north to south in the northern Pacific Ocean. Japan's islands number more than 3,000, and many of them are tiny. For centuries, most Japanese have lived on the four largest islands: **Hokkaido** (hah•KY•doh), **Honshu** (HAHN•shoo), **Shikoku** (shih•KOH•koo), and **Kyushu** (kee•OO•shoo).

Like China, much of Japan is covered by mountains. In fact, the islands of Japan are actually the tops of mountains that rise from the floor of the ocean. About 188 of Japan's mountains are volcanoes. Many earthquakes occur in Japan because the islands lie in an area where parts of the earth's surface often shift.

Because of Japan's mountains, only about 20 percent of its land can be farmed. Throughout Japan's history, local armies often fought over the few patches of fertile

farmland. Just as in ancient Greece, the rugged terrain forced many Japanese to turn to the sea for a living. Early on, they settled in villages along the coast and fished for food. Fish and seafood are still important in the Japanese diet.

The sea surrounding Japan's islands made it easy for people in ships to travel along the coast and from island to island. It encouraged people to become merchants, traveling from village to village with goods to trade. The vast ocean around Japan's islands, however, kept the Japanese people isolated, or separate, from the rest of Asia. As a result, Japan developed its own fiercely independent society with its own religion, art, literature, and government.

Reading Check **Describe** How did Japan's geography shape its society?

▼ **Mount Fuji** is an important national symbol. *How did the region's mountains affect early settlement in Japan?*



Using Geography Skills

Japan's geography isolated the country and helped form a unique culture.

1. List, from north to south, the four major islands that make up Japan.
2. What body of water separates Japan from mainland Asia?

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